

Review of *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights: Women of Color and the Fight for Reproductive Justice* by Zakiya Luna (New York University Press)

by Djuna Hallsworth | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

ABSTRACT Zakiya Luna's rich study combines comprehensive discourse analysis of political rhetoric and archival documents with her own ethnographic experiences within the reproductive justice movement. This book is an entry point into this often-marginalized arena, presenting a unique perspective informed by years of participant observation and thorough research which has produced additional projects, attesting to Luna's expertise in this field of study. As a woman of color, Luna's work is symbolically significant, and her intersectional lens renders this study broadly applicable to scholars of law, sociology, and gender studies, to policymakers and activists, and, indeed, to all women, who the reproductive justice movement indirectly or directly impacts. In tracing the way that reproductive justice has been framed as a "human right," Luna addresses the potential for the human rights discourse to deliver on its intrinsic promise to secure freedom and equity for all.

KEYWORDS feminism, intersectionality, human rights, reproductive justice, women of color

Reproductive Rights as Human Rights: Women of Color and the Fight for Reproductive Justice. By Zakiya Luna. New York: New York University Press, 2020, 299 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-4798-3129-6. US List: \$35.

It was not until more than four decades after the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the notion of "women's rights as human rights" was explicitly articulated. Though, theoretically, this was an historic step towards addressing the oppression and disempowerment of women globally, its actual impact depends upon a definition of human rights that recognizes the full spectrum of ways that harm and suffering can manifest. Zakiya Luna's timely monograph, *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights*, examines the implications of adopting a human rights discourse to conceptualize and achieve social and political justice for women. Though firmly rooted in the context of the United States, this book broadly challenges the problematic identification of rights violations "elsewhere" by states that fail to acknowledge the systematic domestic injustices they perpetuate.

With reproductive justice as her starting point, Luna bases her research on the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, or simply SisterSong: a US collective formed in 1997 as a coalition of sixteen women's organizations. As she points out, SisterSong is not the only voice in the US reproductive justice movement, but it can be credited with bringing this term into the public consciousness (6). Luna's relationship with the SisterSong community began when she was a research assistant interviewing the organization's former national coordinator, Loretta Ross, whose reflections are interspersed throughout the book. This opportunity marked the starting point in several years of participant observation and interviews, which are both directly referenced and which have indirectly contributed to Luna's comprehensive understanding of how SisterSong operates.

She acknowledges the tension between being an active contributor in the activities of SisterSong, and gathering impartial data, conceding that a shortcoming of this approach is in "the ability of the researcher to affect the research site or be affected by it" (21). Beyond this admission, though, the author reveals relatively little about her method of determining and approaching her interview subjects in the main body of the book, ambiguously stating, "Whenever possible, I identified myself as a researcher" (21). A more comprehensive description and justification of her immersive research experience with SisterSong appears in Appendix A, though this information might be better suited to a preface or to inclusion in the introduction, where the reader can gain an insight into the nature of her interactions with community members.

The book's mixed-method approach is, however, one of its strengths. By interviewing those participating in SisterSong activities, as well as those in senior positions in the Collective, Luna captures a cross-section of perspectives and identifies patterns in how her interviewees perceive, differentiate, and deploy the phrases "human rights," "social justice," and "reproductive justice." She effectively positions the vocabulary of women engaging in political action within the language of the policy that shapes their embodied experiences.

The book deploys several cogent theoretical frames, the first of which is "restrictive domestication," a phrase that describes the way "the US government has constrained the meaning of 'human rights' to suit its domestic and international needs" (4). This is contrasted with the "revolutionary domestication" of human rights by SisterSong, which aims to reconcile the specific economic and social context and conditions of the US with the seemingly universal applicability of human rights. The first chapter examines US exceptionalism and the selective uptake of human rights rhetoric in US domestic and foreign policy, providing a necessary backdrop against which to set the subsequent chapters.

Chapter two traces the ways that women of color were "pushed" out of mainstream activism and towards a new way of framing their advocacy; though abstruse, the language of human rights had the potential to accommodate the much-needed intersectional approach to reproductive justice that women's rights movements failed to foster. Yet, as chapter three expounds, the restrictive domestication of human rights in the US prompted

women of color to look beyond policymaking at a national level to debates taking place on the international stage: frequently, United Nations conferences and conventions.

Conceptualizing reproductive justice as a human right was, as covered in chapter four, a difficult and contested strategy for SisterSong to adopt, in part because of the problematic image of Western philanthropy that the phrase connotes. Yet the US “largely exempts it[self] from the very global norms it was so central in establishing” (22), and, domestically, conflates human rights with civil rights, thereby limiting their application in line with existing civil rights legislation. Crucial to note, as Luna does, is that, “unlike rights such as voting, reproductive rights, including abortion rights, are not rights previously held by men and then extended to a different group” (65). In this sense, reproductive justice is less about gender equality—with which the women’s movement is associated—and more about mitigating the economic, political and cultural factors that deny women bodily autonomy.

The second half of the book debates the semantic departure between human rights and social justice, and, at times, the discussion is weighed down by a desire to locate a cogent definition of “human rights” within the archival documents and interview material.

Throughout chapter seven, Luna characterizes her interviewees, based on their grasp of human rights, into “learners,” “skeptics,” and “interrogators.” These categories did not prove particularly effective, though, nor did the additional conceptual tool of human rights as “the ground,” “the umbrella,” and “the thread,” or as being over, under, and through SisterSong’s activities. The impulse to classify her interview data into distinct themes and responder types is understandable, but the exposition in this section was often difficult to follow on account of these groupings, which were selectively deployed at varying points throughout the chapter. Quotations were often used to support Luna’s theorizations but it was not always evident whether the responders she referenced were indicative of a broader trend, or the only examples of the phenomenon she cited. This was an ambitious chapter that aimed to present new material as well as retrospectively coding the responses into these two sets of categories, and it would have benefitted from more descriptive subheadings and signposting to frame the discussion around these ideas.

The final chapter reinforces the pertinence of this study, applying the themes raised in the interview material to the wider US political context and contemporary activism. As Luna affirms in the concluding paragraphs, the human rights lens is both a strategy and a motivation; it captures the aspiration to reframe “women’s issues” as symptoms of injustice, repositioning women of color as central, rather than marginal (218–19).

Reproductive Rights as Human Rights juxtaposes the palliative rhetoric of US and UN human rights promises with the voices of those involved in reproductive justice advocacy, emphasizing the urgent need for policymaking to speak with, to, and for those on the margins.

Author Information



Djuna Hallsworth



Djuna Hallsworth has a PhD in Gender and Cultural Studies from the University of Sydney. Her research examines the representation of mothers in Danish state-funded films and television series through the lens of social and cultural policy, and is under contract with Palgrave Macmillan as a monograph to be published in late 2021. Djuna has coordinated and lectured in cultural policy at the University of Sydney and is intrigued by the ways that top-down governance filter into on-screen imagery, marginalizing and privileging particular perspectives and experiences. She has also written on mental illness in film and television and, motivated by her own struggles with mental illness, will continue to write in this sphere.

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